

Of the Church

By John Wesley

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Sermon Number Sermon 74

Sermon Title Of the Church

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Ephesians 4:1-6.

I 1. How much do we almost continually hear about the Church! With many it is matter of daily conversation. And yet how few understand what they talk of! how few know what the term means! A more ambiguous word than this, the Church, is scarce to be found in the English language. It is sometimes taken for a building, set apart for public worship: sometimes for a congregation, or body of people, united together in the service of God. It is only in the latter sense that it is taken in the ensuing discourse.

2. It may be taken indifferently for any number of people, how small or great soever. As, "where two or three are met together in his name," there is Christ; so, (to speak with St. Cyprian,) "where two or three believers are met together, there is a Church." Thus it is that St. Paul, writing to Philemon, mentions "the Church which is in his house;" plainly signifying, that even a Christian family may be termed a Church.

3. Several of those whom God hath called out of the world, (so the original word properly signifies,) uniting together in one congregation, formed a larger Church; as the Church at Jerusalem; that is, all those in

Jerusalem whom God had so called. But considering how swiftly these were multiplied, after the day of Pentecost, it cannot be supposed that they could continue to assemble in one place; especially as they had not then any large place, neither would they have been permitted to build one. In consequence, they must have divided themselves, even at Jerusalem, into several distinct congregations. In like manner, when St. Paul, several years after, wrote to the Church in Rome, (directing his letter, "To all that are in Rome, called to be saints,") it cannot be supposed that they had any one building capable of containing them all; but they were divided into several congregations, assembling in several parts of the city.

4. The first time that the Apostle uses the word Church is in his preface to the former Epistle to the Corinthians: "Paul called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, unto the Church of God which is at Corinth." The meaning of which expression is fixed by the following words: "To them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus; with all that, in every place," (not Corinth only; so it was a kind of circular letter,) "call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." In the inscription of his second letter to the Corinthians, he speaks still more explicitly: "Unto the Church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints that are in all Achaia." Here he plainly includes all the Churches, or Christian congregations, which were in the whole province.

5. He frequently uses the word in the plural number. So, Gal. 1:2, "Paul an apostle, -- unto the Churches of Galatia;" that is, the Christian congregations dispersed throughout that country. In all these places, (and abundantly more might be cited,) the word Church or Churches means, not the buildings where the Christians assembled, (as it frequently does in the English tongue,) but the people that used to assemble there, one or more Christian congregations. But sometimes the word Church is taken in Scripture in a still more extensive meaning, as including all the Christian congregations that are upon the face of the earth. And in this sense we understand it in our Liturgy, when we say, "Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's Church militant here on earth." In this sense it is unquestionably taken by St. Paul, in his exhortation to the elders of Ephesus: (Acts 20:28:) "Take heed to the Church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood." The Church

here, undoubtedly, means the catholic or universal Church; that is, all the Christians under heaven.

6. Who those are that are properly "the Church of God," the Apostle shows at large, and that in the clearest and most decisive manner, in the passage above cited; wherein he likewise instructs all the members of the Church, how to "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith they are called."

7. Let us consider, First, who are properly the Church of God? What is the true meaning of that term? "The Church at Ephesus," as the Apostle himself explains it, means, "the saints," the holy persons, "that are in Ephesus," and there assemble themselves together to worship God the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ; whether they did this in one or (as we may probably suppose) in several places. But it is the Church in general, the catholic or universal Church, which the Apostle here considers as one body: Comprehending not only the Christians in the house of Philemon, or any one family; not only the Christians of one congregation, of one city, of one province, or nation; but all the persons upon the face of the earth, who answer the character here given. The several particulars contained therein, we may now more distinctly consider.

8. "There is one Spirit" who animates all these, all the living members of the Church of God. Some understand hereby the Holy Spirit himself, the Fountain of all spiritual life; and it is certain, "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." Others understand it of those spiritual gifts and holy dispositions which are afterwards mentioned.

9. "There is," in all those that have received this Spirit, "one hope;" a hope full of immortality. They know, to die is not to be lost: Their prospect extends beyond the grave. They can cheerfully say, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, according to his abundant mercy, hath begotten us again to a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away."

10. "There is one Lord," who has now dominion over them, who has set

up his kingdom in their hearts, and reigns over all those that are partakers of this hope. To obey him, to run the way of his commandments, is their glory and joy. And while they are doing this with a willing mind they, as it were, "sit in heavenly places with Christ Jesus."

11. "There is one faith;" which is the free gift of God, and is the ground of their hope. This is not barely the faith of a Heathen; Namely, a belief that "there is a God," and that he is gracious and just, and, consequently, "a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Neither is it barely the faith of a devil; though this goes much farther than the former. For the devil believes, and cannot but believe, all that is written both in the Old and New Testament to be true. But it is the faith of St. Thomas, teaching him to say with holy boldness, "My Lord, and my God!" It is the faith which enables every true Christian believer to testify with St. Paul, "The life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

12. "There is one baptism;" which is the outward sign our one Lord has been pleased to appoint, of all that inward and spiritual grace which he is continually bestowing upon his Church. It is likewise a precious means, whereby this faith and hope are given to those that diligently seek him. Some, indeed, have been inclined to interpret this in a figurative sense; as if it referred to that baptism of the Holy Ghost which the Apostles received at the day of Pentecost, and which, in a lower degree, is given to all believers: But it is a stated rule in interpreting Scripture, never to depart from the plain, literal sense, unless it implies an absurdity. And beside, if we thus understood it, it would be a needless repetition, as being included in, "There is one Spirit."

13. "There is one God and Father of all" that have the Spirit of adoption, which "crieth in their hearts, Abba, Father;" which "witnesseth" continually "with their spirits," that they are the children of God: "Who is above all," -- the Most High, the Creator, the Sustainer, the Governor of the whole universe: "And through all," -- pervading all space; filling heaven and earth: Totam Mens agitans molem, et magno se corpore miscens: -- [The following is Wharton's translation of this quotation from Virgil: -- "The general soul Lives in the parts, and agitates the

whole." -- Edit.] "And in you all," -- in a peculiar manner living in you, that are one body, by one spirit: Making your souls his loved abode, The temples of indwelling God.

14. Here, then, is a clear unexceptionable answer to that question, "What is the Church?" The catholic or universal Church is, all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be "one body," united by "one spirit;" having "one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all."

15. That part of this great body, of the universal Church, which inhabits any one kingdom or nation, we may properly term a National Church; as, the Church of France, the Church of England, the Church of Scotland. A smaller part of the universal Church are the Christians that inhabit one city or town; as the Church of Ephesus, and the rest of the seven Churches mentioned in the Revelation. Two or three Christian believers united together are a Church in the narrowest sense of the word. Such was the Church in the house of Philemon, and that in the house of Nymphas, mentioned Col. 4:15. A particular Church may, therefore, consist of any number of members, whether two or three, or two or three millions. But still, whether they be larger or smaller, the same idea is to be preserved. They are one body, and have one Spirit, one Lord, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

16. This account is exactly agreeable to the nineteenth Article of our Church, the Church of England: (Only the Article includes a little more than the Apostle has expressed:) "OF THE CHURCH. "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered." It may be observed, that at the same time our thirty-nine Articles were compiled and published, a Latin translation of them was published by the same authority. In this the words were *coetus credentium*; "a congregation of believers;" plainly showing that by faithful men, the compilers meant, men endued with living faith. This brings the Article to a still nearer agreement to the account given by the Apostle. But it may be doubted whether the Article speaks of a particular Church, or of the Church universal. The title, "Of the Church," seems to have reference to the

catholic Church; but the second clause of the Article mentions the particular Churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome. Perhaps it was intended to take in both; so to define the universal Church as to keep in view the several particular Churches of which it is composed.

17. These things being considered, it is easy to answer that question, "What is the Church of England?" It is that part, those members, of the Universal Church who are inhabitants of England. The Church of England is, that body of men in England, in whom "there is one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith;" which have "one baptism," and "one God and Father of all." This and this alone is the Church of England, according to the doctrine of the Apostle.

18. But the definition of a Church, laid down in the Article, includes not only this, but much more, by that remarkable addition: "In which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered." According to this definition, those congregations in which the pure Word of God (a strong expression) is not preached are no parts either of the Church of England, or the Church catholic; as neither are those in which the sacraments are not duly administered.

19. I will not undertake to defend the accuracy of this definition. I dare not exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be "the pure word of God," are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are not "duly administered." Certainly if these things are so, the Church of Rome is not so much as a part of the catholic Church; seeing therein neither is "the pure word of God" preached, nor the sacraments "duly administered." Whoever they are that have "one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all," I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship: Nor would I, on these accounts, scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic Church; neither would I have any objection to receive them, if they desired it, as members of the Church of England.

II. 20. We proceed now to the second point. What is it to "walk worthy

of the vocation wherewith we are called?" It should always be remembered that the word walk, in the language of the Apostle, is of a very extensive signification. It includes all our inward and outward motions; all our thoughts, and words, and actions. It takes in, not only everything we do, but everything we either speak or think. It is, therefore, no small thing "to walk," in this sense of the word, "worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called;" to think, speak, and act, in every instance in a manner worthy of our Christian calling.

21. We are called to walk, First, "with all lowliness:" to have that mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus; not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think; to be little, and poor, and mean, and vile in our own eyes; to know ourselves as also we are known by Him to whom all hearts are open; to be deeply sensible of our own unworthiness, of the universal depravity of our nature, (in which dwelleth no good thing,) -- prone to all evil, averse to all good; insomuch that we are not only sick, but dead in trespasses and sins, till God breathes upon the dry bones, and creates life by the fruit of his lips. And suppose this is done, -- suppose he has now quickened us, infusing life into our dead souls; yet how much of the carnal mind remains! How prone is our heart still to depart from the living God! What a tendency to sin remains in our heart, although we know our past sins are forgiven! And how much sin, in spite of all our endeavours, cleaves both to our words and actions! Who can be duly sensible how much remains in him of his natural enmity to God, or how far he is still alienated from God by the ignorance that is in him?

22. Yea, suppose God has now thoroughly cleansed our heart, and scattered the last remains of sin; yet how can we be sensible enough of our own helplessness, our utter inability to all good, unless we are every hour, yea, every moment, endued with power from on high? Who is able to think one good thought, or to form one good desire, unless by that Almighty power which worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure? We have need even in this state of grace, to be thoroughly and continually penetrated with a sense of this. Otherwise we shall be in perpetual danger of robbing God of his honour, by glorying in something we have received, as though we had not received it.

23. When our inmost soul is thoroughly tintured therewith, it remains that we "be clothed with humility." The word used by St. Peter seems to imply that we be covered with it as with a surtout; that we be all humility, both within and without; tinturing all we think, speak, and do. Let all our actions spring from this fountain; let all our words breathe this spirit; that all men may know we have been with Jesus, and have learned of him to be lowly in heart.

24. And being taught of Him who was meek as well as lowly in heart, we shall then be enabled to "walk with all meekness;" being taught of Him who teacheth as never man taught, to be meek as well as lowly in heart. This implies not only a power over anger, but over all violent and turbulent passions. It implies the having all our passions in due proportion; none of them either too strong or too weak; but all duly balanced with each other; all subordinate to reason; and reason directed by the Spirit of God. Let this equanimity govern your whole souls; that your thoughts may all flow in an even stream, and the uniform tenor of your words and actions be suitable thereto. In this "patience" you will then "possess your souls;" which are not our own while we are tossed by unruly passions. And by this all men may know that we are indeed followers of the meek and lowly Jesus.

25. Walk with all "longsuffering." This is nearly related to meekness, but implies something more. It carries on the victory already gained over all your turbulent passions; notwithstanding all the powers of darkness, all the assaults of evil men or evil spirits. It is patiently triumphant over all opposition, and unmoved though all the waves and storms thereof go over you. Though provoked ever so often, it is still the same, -- quiet and unshaken; never being "overcome of evil," but overcoming evil with good.

26. The "forbearing one another in love" seems to mean, not only the not resenting anything, and the not avenging yourselves; not only the not injuring, hurting, or grieving each other, either by word or deed; but also the bearing one another's burdens; yea, and lessening them by every means in our power. It implies the sympathizing with them in their sorrows, afflictions, and infirmities; the bearing them up when, without our help, they would be liable to sink under their burdens; the

endeavouring to lift their sinking heads, and to strengthen their feeble knees.

27. Lastly: the true members of the Church of Christ "endeavour," with all possible diligence, with all care and pains, with unwearied patience, (and all will be little enough,) to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace;" to preserve inviolate the same spirit of lowliness and meekness, of longsuffering, mutual forbearance, and love; and all these cemented and knit together by that sacred tie, -- the peace of God filling the heart. Thus only can we be and continue living members of that Church which is the body of Christ.

28. Does it not clearly appear from this whole account, why, in the ancient Creed, commonly called the Apostles", we term it the universal or catholic Church, -- "the holy catholic Church?" How many wonderful reasons have been found out for giving it this appellation! One learned man informs us, "The Church is called holy, because Christ, the Head of it, is holy." Another eminent author affirms, "It is so called because all its ordinances are designed to promote holiness;" and yet another, -- "because our Lord intended that all the members of the Church should be holy." Nay, the shortest and the plainest reason that can be given, and the only true one, is, -- The Church is called holy, because it is holy, because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as He that called them is holy. How clear is this! If the Church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it. If this whole body be animated by one spirit, and endued with one faith, and one hope of their calling; then he who has not that spirit, and faith, and hope, is no member of this body. It follows, that not only no common swearer, no Sabbath-breaker, no drunkard, no whoremonger, no thief, no liar, none that lives in any outward sin, but none that is under the power of anger or pride, no lover of the world, in a word, none that is dead to God, can be a member of his Church.

29. Can anything then be more absurd, than for men to cry out, "The Church! The Church!" and to pretend to be very zealous for it, and violent defenders of it, while they themselves have neither part nor lot therein, nor indeed know what the Church is? And yet the hand of God is

in this very thing! Even in this his wonderful wisdom appears, directing their mistake to his own glory, and causing "the earth to help the woman." [Rev.12:16] Imagining that they are members of it themselves, the men of the world frequently defend the Church: Otherwise the wolves that surround the little flock on every side would in a short time tear them in pieces. And for this very reason, it is not wise to provoke them more than is unavoidable. Even on this ground, let us, if it be possible, as much as lieth in us, "live peaceably with all men." Especially as we know not how soon God may call them too out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of his dear Son.

30. In the mean time, let all those who are real members of the Church, see that they walk holy and unblamable in all things. "Ye are the light of the world!" Ye are "a city set upon a hill," and "cannot be hid." O "let your light shine before men!" Show them your faith by your works. Let them see, by the whole tenor of your conversation, that your hope is all laid up above! Let all your words and actions evidence the spirit whereby you are animated! Above all things, let your love abound. Let it extend to every child of man: Let it overflow to every child of God. By this let all men know whose disciples ye are, because you "love one another."

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